

1493. w. 4.

INDIVIDUAL VICE, THE SOURCE OF NATIONAL CALAMITY.

A
SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

CHAPEL OF THE RIGHT REVEREND DR. WILLIAM ABERNETHY-DRUMMOND, IN EDINBURGH,

On the 26th Feb. 1795;

THE DAY APPOINTED BY HIS MAJESTY FOR A NATIONAL
FAST AND HUMILIATION.

By JAMES WALKER, A. B.

OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

O me infelicem ! qui nunc dēnum intelligo,
Ut illa mihi profuerint quæ despexeram,
Et quæ laudaram quantum luctus habuerint !

PHOEB.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED FOR N. R. CHEYNE.

AND SOLD BY F. & C. RIVINGTON, LONDON.

MDCCXCV.



TO THE FRIENDS

WHO REQUESTED THE PUBLICATION

OF THE

FOLLOWING DISCOURSE,

IT IS NOW RESPECTFULLY

INSCRIBED.



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IT IS NOW REQUESTED

THAT

INDIVIDUAL VICE, THE SOURCE OF NATIONAL
CALAMITY.

S E R M O N.

I PETER ii. 15, 16.

*For so is the will of God, that with well-doing
ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish
men: As free, and not using your liberty for
a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants
of God.*

NATIONS, like men, have each their
peculiar character, and are each dis-
tinguished by their particular sentiments
and manners. Time, however, which is
continually changing the individuals of

which



which they are composed, and the circumstances by which they are affected, contributes also with a steady, though sometimes imperceptible influence, to change that character, and those sentiments and manners. Like men, too, nations have their growth, their vigour, and their fall; and their existence is prolonged, or their ruin accelerated, according as virtue or vice predominates among the inhabitants. In this island, the changes of character, sentiments, and manners, have at different periods been various and important; and the investigation of those changes and their consequences, would gratify curiosity, and afford much instruction. We are chiefly concerned, however, with the present period; nor would our time permit us to take such a view of our past history, as would answer the purposes either of curiosity, or of usefulness.

At present, then, it is obvious, that,
among



among other things, we are distinguished by a rage for politics and political wrangling, to which no former æra of our history affords any parallel: and in consequence of this, many amongst us have become impatient of all legal restraint, and unfriendly to that mode of government, with which our ancestors were pleased, and under which they were happy. Our Presses teem with writings on the subject of civil government beyond all precedent; and political poison is industriously disseminated through the remotest corners of the nation, by men who are dissatisfied they know not why, and who are endeavouring to amend what they appear not to understand. The fatal bait, too, is unfortunately swallowed with avidity by the unwary multitude; because, whilst it flatters their pride, and raises with expectation their selfish passions, it unhappily lulls their reason asleep, prevents them from considering the consequences,

quences, and from taking warning by the examples of past ages, or the still more dreadful example of the present.

The contagion has even reached our churches; and places set apart for religious instruction, have too often resounded with the doctrines of civil polity. Some Christian teachers, of various denominations, forgetting the inoffensive character of their Divine Master, the Prince of peace, and Lord of righteousness, have assumed the office of legislators, and have contributed to the dissemination of civil dissention and political discontent; and it has in consequence been thought necessary, by those of a more respectable character, to take the same method of answering the fallacious reasonings of those unworthy disturbers of the national tranquillity, who, as a most learned and acute critic* has well observed, recur to the common subterfuge, of "which every setter up of strange gods, and
" every

* *Monthly Review*, October, 1780, page 274.

" every CONSCIENTIOUS troubler of the
 " public peace, have artfully availed them-
 " selves to silence the clamour of expostula-
 " tion. TRUTH! TRUTH! is their general
 " cry; and with this hopeful pretence, pru-
 " dence and humility, and every amiable
 " and useful virtue are left behind; while
 " CONSCIENCE (*conscience!*) blindly rushes
 " forward to oppose order, insult authority,
 " and overturn the customs of ages."—

These artful levellers do not show their
 cloven foot at once; but with the cunning
 of the grand deceiver, who appeared as an
 angel of light, they put on the semblance
 of truth, and in outward appearance, the
 innocence of saints. It becomes, then, a se-
 rious duty to oppose them, and to prevent
 the people from being misled on a subject
 which so materially affects their present,
 and which certainly may affect their fu-
 ture happiness. Unfortunately, however,
 that lukewarmness in religion, and laxity
 and leniency of evil-doers, and for the praise of

of morals, which are also prominent features in our national character, plead so effectually for the licentiousness, which of late years has been denominated liberty, that the strongest arguments for civil order and political subordination are neglected or despised.

Thus, our private vices are the true causes of our public danger, and give real effect to the insidious designs of our foreign and domestic enemies; and the reformation of these vices, is the only means by which we can avoid this danger, and, either as individuals or as citizens, acquire real security. For without private virtue, and individual religion, the wisest schemes of politics must eventually be ineffectual, and the best civil constitution must quickly decay. Let us, then, beware how we attend to the deceitful representations of the minions of sedition, who have in this age decorated themselves with the gorgeous

ous title of *reformers*; or in the emphatic words of an inspired Apostle, who was himself a man of no mean abilities, and of no contemptible learning, let us “beware
 “lest any man spoil us through philosophy
 “and vain deceit, after the tradition of
 “men, after the rudiments of the world,
 “and not after Christ;” and in the no less emphatic words of another inspired author, let us, “as strangers and pilgrims,
 “abstain from fleshly lusts, which war
 “against the soul; having our conversation
 “honest among the nations; that whereas
 “they speak against us as evil-doers, they
 “may by our good works which they shall
 “behold, glorify God in the day of visitation;
 “and let us submit ourselves to
 “every ordinance of man, for the Lord’s
 “sake; whether it be to the king as supreme;
 “or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him, for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise
 “of

“ of them that do well. For so is the will
 “ of God, that with well-doing, we may
 “ put to silence the ignorance of foolish
 “ men: as free, yet not using our liberty
 “ for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the
 “ servants of God.” From these important
 words of the Apostle, we learn that the
 true cause of political depravity, and, of
 consequence, national ruin, is a want of
practical religion; and that the lusts of the
 flesh, as they are enemies to virtue and to
 Christianity, are equally unfriendly to the
 institutions of civil government, and the
 restraints of law. With great propriety,
 then, the inspired author commands us to
 abstain from private vices, before he en-
 joins the necessity of obedience to those in
 authority: and by thus destroying the
 cause of turbulence and disobedience, he
 renders such submission perfectly easy.
 These injunctions he sanctions, by decla-
 ring that such is the will of God; and well
 knowing

knowing how apt men are to drive things to extremes, and to abuse the greatest blessings, he cautions us against using our liberty for a cloak of maliciouſness, and shews the necessity of employing it to become more sincerely and fervently the servants of God.

By pursuing a conduct opposite to this, however, mankind have fallen short of that happiness, which is the end of all our wishes, and which is the pretended object of the plans of modern reformers; yet that a very considerable share of happiness and tranquillity might be attained even in this world, from a strict obedience to the divine commands, is most certain. For it is evident beyond all possibility of dispute, that the intention of the Deity in creating man, was to promote human happiness, and all the dispensations he has been pleased to unfold to us, have had the same tendency. But though such was certainly the inten-

tion of our Creator, and such the purpose of his providence, the end has never been attained ; and misery has been predominant in every age. It was first brought into the world by sin, and it has ever since continued amongst us from the same cause. Our innocence was forfeited for the gratification of a paltry appetite, and a foolish curiosity, which prompted our first parents in direct defiance of the divine command, to gratify their palate and their desire to *know good and evil*. Since that unfortunate period, the malignity of human passions has increased the miseries of human life to an astonishing degree. For though the avowed purpose of all the sons and daughters of Adam in their several pursuits is the attainment of happiness, they have generally been deceived by their lusts, their appetites and passions; and having mistaken the road which leads to it, they have found only an increase of misery.

They

They have sought it in the bustle of public life, or in the gratification of violent passions, in the pursuits of science, or in the enjoyment of society; but they have neglected *the small still voice of religion*, and have seldom endeavoured to find it where however true happiness is only to be found, in the pursuits of private virtue, and in obeying the laws of God.

Nor have nations and large communities been more successful than private individuals. For, depending too much on external policy, and viewing religion merely as an engine of state, the rulers of the world have generally found their schemes fail them in the day of calamity; and when, through dissatisfaction or disappointment, the people have become tired of their situation, instead of reforming their private conduct, where the real evil generally lies, or of directing their steps by the clear light of religion, they have

vainly

vainly sought for happiness in a change of government.

Thus the Jews, when they had God himself for their king, sought a king like the nations around them; and we are told that "God gave them a king in his anger, and "took him away in his wrath." He withheld not from them their desire, but by the wonderful dispensations of his providence, he punished them for their rebellion against himself by granting it. That unhappy people, at present the scorn and outcast of all the nations of the earth, afford a striking example to the world. Their private vices increased from age to age, and though they were often punished, they never totally reformed them; till at length they arose to such a height of atrocity and unbelief, as to weary out the long-suffering of their indulgent God. In consequence of this, their punishment came upon them like a flood; a foreign army threatened them
from

from without, and civil dissention among themselves completed their ruin. Thus were they broken off; and from their dreadful example, let us learn "not to be high-minded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches," his own peculiar people, it becomes us to "take heed lest he also spare not us."

All other nations have been dealt with in a manner similar to the Jews; while they have been attentive to religion and to the duties of morality, they have generally risen in consequence, power, and wealth; but when this power and this wealth have once introduced luxury and vice, they have fallen from their height with greater rapidity than they attained to it, and have, at length sunk into insignificance and contempt. On account of their bad conduct in prosperity, Providence generally makes it the cause of their fall, and the instrument of their punishment.

Thus,

Thus, the Roman empire, while the inhabitants preserved their manly virtues, and a respect for their religion, absurd as it was, rose in dignity and power. But no sooner had the extent of their conquests introduced among them a love of ease and luxury, with their consequences, licentiousness and impatience of government, than that mighty empire crumbled into pieces; and the lordly Romans became an easy prey to the Goths and Vandals: nor have they ever since regained a single spark of their former spirit; but still remain vicious, effeminate, cowardly, and superstitious.

But, to pass by the numerous examples of ancient times, which might be adduced to prove the necessity of private virtue in supporting nations, we shall turn our eyes to a modern kingdom; the crimes and punishment of which afford to us so dreadful an example, as to be almost unparalleled in the annals of history.

France

France has long and deservedly ranked high among the kingdoms of Europe; but the storm which has now burst forth with such astonishing violence, has been gathering for years, perhaps for ages; and is unquestionably the effect of individual vice become almost general. In external circumstances it appears to have been at the height of its glory in the reign of Louis XIV. and it shewed evident symptoms of decay in that of his successor; during the latter part of whose reign, vice, luxury, and irreligion, rode triumphant through the nation, from the court to the cottage. The king gave himself up to the guidance of abandoned women, and allowed the nation to be governed by persons without virtue and of no principle. The nobility were licentious, tyrannical, and unjust; and the philosophers were either Atheists or Deists, who, by ridiculing religion, and undermining the law, spread

Atheism

Atheism and turbulence among the bulk of the people.

The progress of vice indeed is gradual, even when it is most malignant; and in this work of darkness we find it has been peculiarly so. The fences of morality and religion were so artfully sapped as to create no alarm. The people were conducted from one stage of vice to another by easy steps, till at length moral virtue and religious faith were almost entirely banished from a large portion of the nation; and, when the restraints of Christianity lost their power, it was an easy matter to undermine society, and destroy the law. Nor is it difficult to find pretences to justify such conduct; and with fair pretences, and high-sounding words, it is equally easy to impose on the weak and ignorant, the giddy and vain. To men of ungoverned passions, and with habits as unchangeable and permanent as the *skin of the Ethiopian, or the spots of the leopard,*

leopard; the restraints of law must be equally unpleasant as those of Christianity had been in an earlier stage of their progress; and the pretext of reform is so specious as frequently to delude alike the reformers and others. They may even prevail on themselves to believe that reformation and the good of the community is their only object; while their sole efforts are directed to gratify some private passion, or to minister to their own vanity, pride, and ambition. They do not perhaps then intend to turn all into confusion, and to wade through a sea of blood; but, as they proceed, they grow callous even to the dictates of common humanity.

The prime movers of the French Revolution, doubtless, never meant, in the first stage of their political career, to drive things to such a dreadful extremity as they have since attained, and would unquestionably have shuddered at the very thought of

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it;

it; but a little attention to the history of the world, to scripture, and to the ways of Providence, would have taught them that nothing better was to be expected. For "the beginning of strife," political strife especially, is as one letteth out water," and, "the overflowings of ungodliness are like the overflowings of the sea, which no power can stem, but that God, who said, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed." But to the experience of past times, to the dictates of the Deity, and to the advice and example of all sober men, they paid no attention; and they have justly reaped the bitter fruits of their own rash and inconsiderate labours. They have all suffered (and they have involved their country in ruin) for their rashness, their folly, and their guilt. They have fallen victims to the fury of others more lawless than themselves; who have also in
their

their turn shared the same fate from another party, or they drag out an inglorious existence as exiles in a foreign land.

Such appears to have been the procedure of this political storm, which unfortunately burst on the head of a man who, in better times, would have proved a blessing to his people, who had their good most sincerely at heart, and who was disposed to grant them that liberty which they certainly wanted, but which they had neither virtue nor prudence enough to enjoy. So fluctuating is the state of human grandeur, and so dangerous the state of those men, however virtuous they themselves may be, who are in high stations at a period when power is usurped by a lawless, ignorant, and vicious rabble, who, as the Apostle most powerfully reasons, “ walk after the
“ flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and de-
“ spise government. Presumptuous are
“ they, self-willed; they are not afraid to
“ speak

“ speak evil of dignities, but, as natural
 “ brute beasts, speak evil of the things they
 “ understand not; and shall utterly perish
 “ in their own corruptions: they sport
 “ themselves with their own deceivings,
 “ they cannot cease from sin, and beguile
 “ unstable souls. They are wells without
 “ water, clouds that are carried with a
 “ tempest, to whom the mist of darkness is
 “ reserved for ever. For when they speak
 “ great swelling words of vanity, they al-
 “ lure through the lusts of the flesh,
 “ through much wantonness, those that
 “ were clean escaped from them who live
 “ in error. While they promise them li-
 “ berty, they themselves are the servants
 “ of corruption; for of whom a man is
 “ overcome, of the same is he brought in
 “ bondage.”

On these emphatic words of St. Peter, I
 shall make no comment; but leave you
 to consider whether they do not apply
 with

with as much plainness and precision to the men who have for some time past borne rule in the distracted kingdom of France, as if they had been written for the occasion. These infamous leaders of a deluded people have now proceeded to such a pitch of wickedness as has astonished all the nations of Europe. They have succeeded, too, beyond their most sanguine hopes, in accomplishing their bloody purposes, in banishing all order and all justice from their unhappy country; and though many illustrious and many innocent persons have suffered, and are suffering, in consequence of it, we cannot doubt but that, as a nation, it deserved the dreadful punishment it has experienced.

With such an awful example before us, let us consider our own situation; for the same sanguinary demagogues have threatened to spread their principles and practice through other nations, and to us they
 bear

bear a mortal antipathy. Our danger is the greater, when we reflect that we have among ourselves men who are "murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts, who speak great swelling words, and who hold men's persons in admiration because of advantage."

We have been often and confidently told indeed, and perhaps for no good purpose, that from Britons we have nothing to fear; and that the crimes which disgrace France, are so repugnant to our nature and our character, as to be almost impossible. And indeed, we acknowledge and glory in acknowledging that with all our faults as a nation, we still possess many good qualities. We still retain our ancient bravery, we are still generous, liberal, and humane; but let us not deceive ourselves with general views of things, or lull ourselves into security, while there is a possibility of danger. There are certainly many men amongst

mongst us, who are ready to take advantage of the first opportunity, which may be thought favourable for their purposes. The progress of vice too, though always gradual, on some occasions makes most rapid movements; and our private vices are already so great, as perhaps justly to deserve the vengeance of an offended Deity.

It deserves likewise to be remarked, that those men who have so loudly sounded in our ears the horn of sedition, have long laboured hard to infuse their notions into the lower classes of our people. They have endeavoured to make those men the judges of the law, and reformers of the legislature; who have all their lives been employed in manual labour, and whose education has been of the most contracted kind. This must naturally pave the way for dissatisfaction, which again leads to idleness; and dissatisfaction and idleness, in uncultivated minds especially, lay a foundation

tion for vices the most atrocious. In such circumstances the purest minds may be led astray ; for political depravity combined with idleness and vice, advances like a torrent, and overwhelms all before it. Let us here reflect too, that our enemies though now perhaps the most savage of human beings, were considered not many years ago as humane, polite, and friendly ; nor can we deny that their nation at large, possessed much of what has been called the milk of human kindness. But the good part of them in their astonishment and weakness, allowed themselves to be overpowered by those who were already ripe in wickedness. Many were seduced, others were murdered, or lie concealed and inactive in the crowd, in some remote corner of the nation ; or are living in banishment on the charity of foreigners, the miserable spectators of their country's ruin.

Such

Such is the situation of France, and such are the miseries which follow individual vice, when it has become general, or gained an ascendancy in any nation. With so awful a scene before our eyes, let us beware lest we delude ourselves like those scoffers, of whom the Apostle says, that they shall exclaim, "where is the threatening of his coming! for all things continue as they were;" for though we have hitherto been spared, unless we make the proper use of the mercies vouchsafed us, the *devouring scourge* will certainly overtake us when we least expect it. Nor is it enough merely, "to spread forth our hands and make many prayers, which God declares he will not hear, unless we also wash and make ourselves clean, unless we put away the evil of our doings, cease to do evil, and learn to do well. Then, and then only, the Lord declares, that though

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"our

" our sins be as scarlet, they shall be made
 " white as snow, and though they be like
 " crimson, they shall be as wool. If we
 " be willing and obedient, we may yet eat
 " the good of the land; but if we refuse
 " and rebel, we shall be devoured with
 " the sword, for the mouth of the Lord
 " hath spoken it!"

We have often assembled, in former
 contests, in obedience to the commands of
 a pious Sovereign, to implore pardon of
 our sins, and success on our arms; and
 we have now for the third time, during
 the present more eventful period, assem-
 bled for the same purpose. On the second
 occasion, our danger was much greater
 than it appeared to be on the first; and
 such has been the progress of our adver-
 saries since this last period, that our dan-
 ger is infinitely greater now than it was
 then; a consideration to us of most se-
 rious

rious importance. For though it cannot be denied, that the crimes of our enemies are of a blacker die than our own, yet there is nothing improbable or unlikely in supposing them to be instruments in the hands of Providence, for our punishment. Thus were the heathen nations repeatedly employed to punish the vices of the Jews, though their own vices were more numerous and more flagrant; and thus were the Romans, though then immersed in vice almost beyond example, the destroyers of Jerusalem, and the punishers of the final apostacy of its inhabitants. The Jews were highly favoured; and on account of their disobedience, they deserved signal punishment, and such it is to be feared is our case.

But such is the indulgent goodness of God, and such his long-suffering mercy to nations, as to men, that there is yet a way left for us to escape; for he declares

clares " that at what instant he shall speak
 " concerning a nation, and concerning a
 " kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down,
 " and to destroy; if that nation, against
 " whom he hath pronounced, turn from
 " their evil, He will also repent him of the
 " evil that he thought to do unto them!"

Such is the promise of our indulgent Crea-
 tor; and let us seriously set about perform-
 ing the conditions on which it is made;
 for as he is long-suffering, merciful, and
 kind, for the purpose of leading to repent-
 ance, so he becomes a consuming fire,
 when his warnings are neglected. To us
 as a nation, his warnings have been fre-
 quent; sometimes they have been mild,
 gentle, and insinuating; and at other times,
 they have borne a threatening aspect. He
 has preached repentance and reformation
 to us in a *small still voice*; and, as on the
 present occasion, He has brought the fierce-
 ness

ness of his anger almost to our doors.

“ He has threatened to give us over into
“ the hands of the heathen, and to cause
“ them that hate us to rule over us.” But

we have hitherto, it would appear, neglected or despised all correction. We have gone on from year to year, and from age to age, almost without thinking that there is a God who judgeth the earth; and because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, we have foolishly hardened ourselves in our former sins, and increased our danger by adding to their number.

Let us reflect, however, that a time will come, when mercy shall give place to judgement, and when repentance shall be vain.—“ Already does it appear, that the
“ Lord hath come out of his place to pu-
“ nish the inhabitants of the earth for their
“ iniquity; to cause the earth to disclose
“ her blood, and to be no more able to cover
2 “ her

“her slain.” And though the *destroying scourge and wasting army* have not as yet reached our shores, let us not therefore feel secure; for the present may possibly be the last warning, which even infinite mercy will vouchsafe to us; and if it be neglected, neither the strength of our fleets, nor the number and discipline of our armies, can prevent the punishment of our apostacy. While, on the other hand, if from the danger which threatens us, we are led seriously to repent, and sincerely to reform our conduct; neither the number nor savage fierceness and implacable hatred of our enemies need make us afraid.

At length, then, it becomes us to learn wisdom from the awful experience of other nations, and to beware how we treat the warnings of the present eventful period, with the contempt or neglect which was thrown on the preaching of Noah, lest, like the inhabitants of the old world, we be obliged

obliged to acknowledge our folly and our guilt, when it is too late to avoid the consequences of either. Let us, whilst it is yet in our power, "turn unto the Lord
 "with all our heart, and with fasting, and
 "with weeping, and with mourning; and
 "let us rent our hearts and not our garments, and turn unto the Lord our God:
 "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to
 "anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil."

Whilst our fleets and armies are fighting in defence of our dearest interests, our independence, our liberties, and our religion, let each of us, by reforming his private conduct, insure them success; and, according to the will of God, let us with well-doing put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, and by the regularity of our conduct, and the fervency of our religion, let us render ineffectual the machinations of a cruel and restless enemy. Instead of dwelling

dwelling on political grievances which have no existence, or magnifying those which have, let us, in our several spheres, and as far as our influence extends, spread individual reformation and practical religion through the land: For lukewarmness in religion, and laxity in morals, are mutually the causes and effects of political depravity, and uniformly precede national ruin. An irreligious and immoral man cannot possibly be a good subject, nor, on the other hand, can a bad subject be truly religious or strict in his moral conduct.

Hence, the extreme danger of distracting the minds of the lower classes with notions of political reform, which, even supposing it were necessary, they are of all others the worst qualified to bring about. The direct consequences of such folly must be, as we have already mentioned, dissatisfaction, vice, impatience of restraint, turbulence, and, in the end of the progress, ruin

ruin not to the state only, and to those in the higher spheres of life, but to themselves also.

With this important consideration, which the experience of ages confirms, duly impressed on our minds, let us remove the beam from our own eye before we attempt to remove motes from any thing without us; let us reform our own private conduct and principles; and the grievances which we complain of in the state will vanish of course, and our government will rest on a firmer basis than any on which the ingenuity of man could otherwise place it. No human institution ever was or ever can be perfect. It is folly in the extreme to expect it, and it never is expected but by men who are totally ignorant of every principle of human nature, or by those who, having lost all power over themselves, and who are impatient of all legal restraint, make the *desire* of perfection a pretence for

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promoting

promoting licentiousness. Let us then, from the folly and the vices of others, learn experience ourselves; and, without meddling with things too high for us, let us first get rid of the slavery of sin, and the necessary restraints of civil government will feel less irksome to us.

While we justly brand our enemies with the odious title of Athiests both in principle and practice, let us beware lest they, with equal justice, retort upon us one half of the charge; and lest, by our irreligion and immoralities we give them reason to say that we ourselves are not serious believers of the holy religion which we profess. Thus, by our good works we shall give the lie to the malicious insinuations of our adversaries, whether foreign or domestic, and by uniting in the fear of the Lord, and in the power of his might, we shall put to silence and contempt their folly and their ignorance. Let us
use

use the liberty with which our religion and our country have made us free, as not abusing it; and instead of employing so great a blessing for a cloak of malicioufness, or to promote the purposes of sedition and licentiousness, let us shew the world that we deserve it, by promoting in our several spheres the influence of true and practical religion, and by becoming ourselves in spirit and in truth the servants of God.

F I N I S.